



The Prayer of Saint Ephraim the Syrian

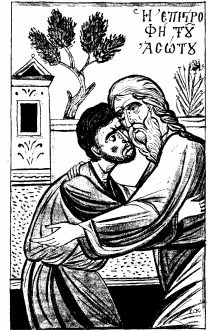
“Lord and Master
of my life, deliver me from the spirit of
laziness, despondency, desire for
power over others and useless talk.
(metanoia or prostration)

Give rather to me your servant, a
spirit of purity, humility, patience and
love. (metanoia)

Yes Lord and King, allow me to see
my own sins and faults and not to
judge my brothers and sisters, for
you are blessed forever and unto the
ages of ages. Amen.” (metanoia)

Religious Ed Sundays

A program of the Religious Education Team of St. Catherine



- **REPENTANCE: Prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian,” Out with the Negative and In with the Positive”**

The first words Jesus stated following His baptism and subsequent 40 day temptation in the wilderness were; “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt. 4:17). They mark the beginning of His three year public ministry. They are the exact words that the Forerunner, John the Baptist, stated as he was baptizing in the wilderness (Mt. 3:2). We of course recognize repentance as a central theme of Great Lent. We speak, teach, and preach about it annually. Repentance, from the Greek scriptural word, “metanoia”, means a change of mind. This leads to a change of heart and therefore a change of direction in one’s life. Its reference is a change of focus from self and the material realm to God and the spiritual. One of the great Lenten tools we have to assist us in this attitudinal change is the Prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian of the 4th Century:

“Lord and Master of my life, deliver me from the spirit of laziness, despondency, desire for power over others and useless talk.” (metanoia or prostration) “Give rather to me your servant, a spirit of purity, humility, patience and love.” (metanoia) “Yes Lord and King, allow me to see my own sins and faults and not to judge my brothers and sisters, for you are blessed forever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.” (metanoia)

This prayer is said liturgically in every weekday service of Great Lent. We are encouraged personally to say it in our daily Lenten personal prayers with the accompanying prostrations.

Today’s study guide will focus on the first two stanzas of this Lenten prayer. Repentance is often looked at as something negative. It is however, something very positive because to focus on God and the spiritual realm first is indeed the most positive thing that you or I can do.

The essence of this Prayer is metanoia or repentance. In his book, The Lenten Covenant, Fr. Leonidas Contos, of blessed memory states about the prayer, “For within its small compass it succeeds in capturing the very essence of ‘metanoia’, not merely as a penitential attitude, needful as that may be, but as an act of authentic conversion, a turning completely around of mind and heart” (pg. 68). The prayer begins by asking our Lord and Master to deliver us from four negative attitudes:

- Laziness or slothfulness. This may begin with us physically being lazy, but it also continues to the mental and spiritual realm as well. This laziness then leads to the second attitude: despondency.
- Despondency, or a lack of hope, occurs from the guilt caused by the lazy or slothful action. This lack of hope in turn leads to the third negative attitude, the desire for power.
- Desire for power. When we are despondent we perceive ourselves as worthless, lower than others. Our desire is to correct that by putting ourselves above others, therefore controlling them. This finally brings us to idle or useless talk.

- Idle or useless talk is a denigration of the “Word”, God’s image within us, through useless words. We might speak a lot, but say nothing that is good, helpful or positive. Or we may, at worst, say things that are very negative and hurtful to others.

This first stanza is followed by a prostration or metanoia. This physical act of bowing down to the ground and then rising up again is a repetition of our baptismal vow when we were immersed in the waters of the font three times in remembrance of the three day burial of our Lord and came out of the waters in remembrance of his glorious resurrection. Essentially we died to sin to live anew in Christ. And so it is with this prostration that we “die” to these four negative attitudes and live renewed as an offering to Christ.

The second stanza continues by asking for the following positive attitudes to replace the negative attitudes we have: purity; humility; patience; and love—again followed by a prostration. Purity is defined as a pureness of heart whereby one can “see God” (Mt. 5:8). Humility is knowing oneself as one truly is, non-existent without God and graced with God. Patience is a virtue of one who is slow to anger, merciful, and forgiving. And love is the greatest of all virtues, an unconditional love towards God and others. This stanza is again followed by a prostration or metanoia.

The final stanza focusing on judgement will be discussed in next week’s study guide. This powerful and needful theme of repentance is essential to our life in relationship with God and others and the main theme of the journey of Great Lent.

“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”

Activities:

- Memorize and pray the Lenten Prayer of St. Ephraim daily throughout Great Lent with the accompanying prostrations (metanoias).
- Recall that in each prostration as we go down we ask God to take away negative things from us and as we come back up we focus on God.
- Read the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:11-32) and ponder or discuss repentance, what does it mean when the son “came to himself?”
- Before receiving Holy Communion, children ask for forgiveness from your parents, kissing their right hand and parents ask for forgiveness from your children. Adults, ask for forgiveness from one or more people that you are close to.

Religious Ed Sundays

A program of the Religious Education Team of St. Catherine



- **COMPASSION FOR OUR NEIGHBOUR: “Allow me to see my own sins and faults and not to judge others.”** (*3rd stanza of the Prayer of Saint Ephraim*)

We are called to grow in an infinite loving relationship with God and one another and since God is perfect He also called us to become perfect (Mat. 5:48). What are some attributes of God? Unconditional love, infinite kindness, infinite patience, humility etc. All this we have to imitate, and the struggle to achieve this starts from now and it will never end. But once we really start to work on acquiring these virtues and focus on ourselves, on our improvement, on our own shortcomings it will become harder and harder to have time and energy to judge our brothers and sisters.

Also in the midst of our struggle we realize that we do need forgiveness and mercy. How many times when we have done something bad were we hoping and praying that we will be forgiven and treated with mercy? If we acknowledge that we need mercy and forgiveness then we will also want this for our brothers and sisters, both from people and from God.

But the first step is to start the struggle and to be humble enough to admit that we are weak and that it is so easy to fall in this spiritual combat. Saint Isaac the Syrian tells us a story about a disciple who was praying to see angels and when God granted him his request, the disciple went to inform his spiritual father of the gift he had received. But the spiritual father told him to go back and ask God to take this gift from him and grant him to see his own sins rather than angels for: “He who is accounted worthy to see himself (and his sins) is greater than he who is counted worthy to see angels.” (Saint Isaac of Syria)

Keep in mind that once we have started the battle there is another danger that can arise after we go up a little on the spiritual ladder; we start seeing the mistakes of our brothers and sisters, we become prideful and start judging them. Pride is a very subtle passion and it is the surest way to lose our salvation (Luke 18:10-14). On the other hand, the easiest way to find our salvation is the way of non-judgment (Matt. 7:1). A story is told of a lazy monk who always missed morning prayers because he couldn't get out of bed on time. He overate and was sloppy about everything he did. When he died, the abbot and the brother monks were concerned for his soul. So the abbot said to his fellow monks, “we need to say the Liturgy every day and pray for his soul for forty days so that God might have mercy on him!” They all got to work fervently praying for the monk's soul. While praying, the abbot had a vision where he saw that the monk who just died was very close to the throne of God. The abbot also noticed that the other monks weren't as close as this lazy monk. The abbot became very troubled and couldn't understand this vision. So he asked the departed monk, “How is it, Father, that you are so close to the front of God's throne?” How did you attain the Kingdom when you were such a lazy and terrible monk?” The monk said, “*Father, only for one reason. Yes, it is true that I was undisciplined, I was gluttonous, and I*

repent of those sins. But I never judged anyone. I never harbored a thought that I was better than anyone. I never looked down and despised anyone for his sins and his struggle. And remember, Father, the words of our Lord, that with what measure you use it shall be measured to you, and with what standard of judgment you use, that very same standard God will use in judging you (Mark 4:24). Because I judged no one, God in His mercy and grace has not judged me.”

Once we see our sins and transgressions it is hard to judge others. “Why do we judge our neighbors? Because we are not trying to get to know ourselves! Someone busy trying to understand himself has no time to notice the shortcomings of others. Judge yourself — and you will stop judging others. Judge a poor deed, but do not judge the doer. It is necessary to consider yourself the most sinful of all, and to forgive your neighbor every poor deed. One must hate only the devil, which tempted him. It can happen that someone might appear to be doing something bad to us, but in reality, because of the doer's good intentions, it is a good deed. Besides, the door of penitence is always open, and it is not known who will enter it sooner — you, "the judge," or the one judged by you.” (*St Seraphim of Sarov*)

Suggestions:

1. Resolve within yourself to stop judging whether in your mind/heart or gossiping with your friends. The battle is difficult, and we will fall many times but by God's grace we can conquer. The important thing is that we START the battle and become aware of the gravity of the sin of judging others. Each time we fall and get wounded we have the Mystery of Repentance to heal us and get us ready for the battle again.
 2. Ask the friends you are gossiping with to not allow you to do it anymore and hold each other accountable.
 3. Wear a physical reminder to help you stop judging (a string, prayer rope etc.)
 4. Meditate on the times when you needed mercy and compassion and try to offer that to all around you.
-

Religious Ed Sundays

A program of the Religious Education Team of St. Catherine

- **FORGIVENESS and a practical guide to the sacrament of confession**



Not long ago my daughter who was playing in the back yard, suddenly cried out in pain. Rushing to her side I noticed that she held her right hand in a tight fist. Gently, I tried to have her open her hand to show me what had happened but she was reluctant, even afraid. Eventually I got her to open her hand and there in the middle of her palm was a nasty splinter that had worked its way deep into her skin. Instinctively my daughter hid this from me. I think she knew it would have to come out, and that taking it out would hurt. Now, I explained to her that while removing the splinter might hurt at first, leaving it in would certainly end up causing her much more pain. I told her that if the splinter was left in her palm, soon it would become infected, and removing it would be a much harder task.

Telling this story about my daughter's splinter helps all of us to better understand the process of forgiveness and the practical reason for confession. If you can relate the story of the splinter to the process of sin, and its removal from our hearts then you are on your way to understanding confession and the process of forgiveness. Confession is a sacrament of our Church whereby the sins (splinters) of our life are removed from our souls and we experience true forgiveness. Of course, the longer a sin stays inside of us the greater the chance there is that it will infect our spiritual well being. Simply put any sin left unattended has the ability to make the whole soul sick and even corrupt.

Yet, why does our Church teach us to see a priest to make our confession and to receive the forgiveness of God. Surely, each one of us can simply confess our sins before God and be forgiven. Well the Church has always maintained that God can and does forgive any manner of sins and that forgiveness as well as judgment are His to give. At the same time the Church strongly encourages each of us to enter into and practice the discipline of Holy Confession. It may be easier to understand this process if we return to the story of the splinter and my daughter.

What was her initial reaction to getting a splinter embedded in her hand? The answer was, to hide it, to cover it up. Often we do the same with our sins; we cover them up in all sorts of ways. Why? The simple answer is that we know that to remove them may be difficult, embarrassing, or even painful and no one likes to be in pain or discomfort. However, we also have to recognize that removing a splinter from one's own hand may be difficult. The truth is many of us need help, we need someone else to take a needle and gently but thoroughly remove every last piece of that splinter. This is exactly what happens in confession. The priest with our permission and out of love gently probes and removes the sins from our souls.

Now after that splinter was removed, I washed my daughter's hand, applied an anti-septic, gave her a Popsicle, and bandaged it up. In a similar way, our priests once they have removed the splinter (sin), wash the wounds of our souls, apply the medicine of healing (often the teaching and sacraments of the Church), and bandage up our souls.

Therefore the correct way of viewing confession would be to liken it to the process of healing. Confession is not a time for judgment; we don't enter a courtroom when we come into the Church, but a hospital. Confession is a time where our spiritual wounds are cleaned and bandaged so that they may heal. With this perspective in mind we can understand better the prayers that the priest reads over us and the spiritual exercises and spiritual medicine he prescribes for us, such as certain prayers or activities that are designed to complete the process of healing.

Remember that a priest when hearing our confession never stands in a position of judgment. Rather he stands side by side with us sharing our sins with us, and placing the burden of them upon his own shoulders; "greater love has not one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends." (John 15.13)

Practical steps:

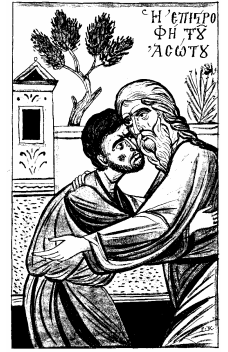
1. Decide to make an examination of your soul, and to confess the sins that you have committed.
2. Schedule an appointment with a priest to hear your confession.
3. Prepare for your confession through prayer, and a careful examination of your soul and the commandments of God.
4. Prayerfully confess your sins with confidence in God's love and mercy.
5. Follow through and put into practice the practical steps your spiritual father gives to you.

Suggestions:

1. Study the picture of the priest and the one confessing before the icon of Christ and the Theotokos. Discuss the posture, the deep meaning, and the feelings associated with this image.
 2. Schedule a confession with a priest. Before your appointment discuss with him the sacrament.
 3. Download the prayers of preparation for confession from www.stcatherinechurch.org, and work through the practical guide that prepares one for confession.
 4. Read the passage of John 20.21-23 and discuss its meaning and its implications.
-

Religious Ed Sundays

A program of the Religious Education Team of St. Catherine



Sources/Resources

SCRIPTURE RESOURCES:

- Psalm 50
- Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)
- Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee (Luke 18:10-14)

WEBSITE RESOURCES

- <http://lent.goarch.org/>
- <http://southern-orthodoxy.blogspot.com/2007/02/st-tikhon-forgiveness-sunday-homily.html>
- <http://www.orthodoxphotos.com/readings/SM/matthew7.shtml>
- <http://www.orthodoxphotos.com/readings/sermon/judging.shtml>

BOOKS*

- * Return – Arch. Nektarios Antonopoulos
- Repentance and Confession – Fr. John Chryssavgis
- * Soul Mending – Fr. John Chryssavgis
- * The Lenten Spring – Thomas Hopko
- * Great Lent – Alexander Schmemmann

* Items with asterisk can be found in the St. Catherine bookstore